

Developing a new strategy for CLUSTERS in Norfolk.

A) Introduction

All Norfolk schools are in local clusters, usually based on a group of primary schools that “feed” to a High school. Special schools in that geography are part of the local cluster and in a few cases children’s centres are included. Such clusters have been in operation for well over fifteen years and were generally organised and run by local groups of interested headteachers. About 14 years ago the then Director of Education made some resource available to support the administration of each cluster to strengthen the ability of the cluster to be an active part of the Local Authority’s communications system between the senior officers of the LA and headteachers. The Director of Children’s Services built on this system and made termly meetings with the chairs of each cluster a key strategic meeting.

To further strengthen clusters greater levels of resource, particularly through what was the Extended Schools Grant were delegated to clusters. This highlighted that significant decisions concerning the employment of cluster Parent Support Advisers and the allocation of the Disadvantage Subsidy needed stronger governance arrangements. Therefore, two years ago a large scale exercise was carried out to get all clusters to establish cluster governance arrangements so that the allocation of resources is governed appropriately.

These additional responsibilities and expectations showed that the vast majority of clusters had satisfactory arrangements in place and in some cases very strong practice emerged. However, in a significant minority of areas cluster arrangements seem to be either at a very low key or there are difficulties getting good decision making processes in place. The size and nature of the different clusters meant that the concept cluster could relate to less than half a dozen schools with no more than 700 or 800 students to some with more than one high school in it and well over 4500 students. Some clusters also attracted additional resource from past excellence cluster funding especially in Great Yarmouth, West Norwich and in Thetford. In some urban areas, particularly in Kings Lynn the allocation of schools to a cluster was based on High school catchments that seem no longer to be relevant.

With increased demand to delegate some funding or other responsibilities through clusters and the need to realign some clusters as well as fundamental questions being asked about school autonomy and collaboration there is a need for Norfolk to clarify its expectations on clusters and recommend how they could be made more effective and rationalise the size and nature of clusters and examine how cluster responsibilities can be better supported.

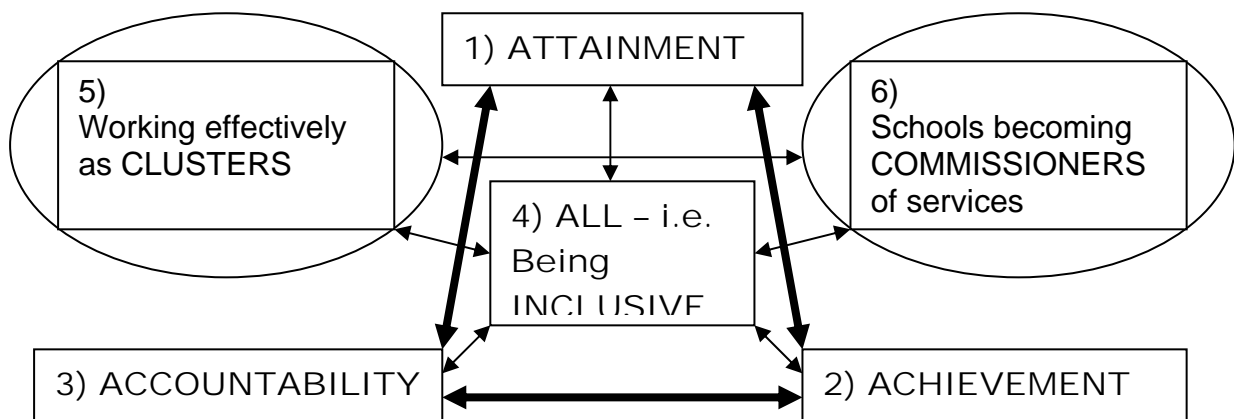
B) Background NCC Children's Services and clusters

Our vision for children and young people in Norfolk is:-

**We believe that all children and young people
have the right to be healthy, happy and safe;
to be loved, valued and respected;
and to have high aspirations for their future.**

To help achieve this vision the Local Authority has promoted school clusters. We see them as an essential part of the vision of the Authority for all schools to play an active role in creating local services within the development of services for all Norfolk's children and young people. They are essential to ensuring that the needs of all the children and young people in an area are considered and met, that school staff and governors have a wider network of support and development and that the needs of different schools are supported and where necessary schools can support intervention and development in another school.

Clusters are a key part of the Norfolk vision for schools. The following diagram summarises that vision;-



All schools have to demonstrate their success in providing;-

- 1) as high a standard of **attainment** as possible for all students,
- 2) that all students **achieve**, that is to ensure as wide a provision as possible to maximise the experience of students, ensure they reach desired outcomes across all five ECM areas and above all to ensure that every student makes the best possible progress during their time at school,
- 3) for every school, leadership teams that are confident in whatever **accountability** regime applies, to be well supported and know the progress their school is making.
- 4) Above all the challenge for schools in the 21st century is to be a beacon of excellence for **EVERY learner**, to be fully inclusive and know how the complex needs of every student can be met.

To achieve these four things we are convinced that schools need to operate as key players in a system wide approach. Therefore every school;

- 5) needs to be an **active member of collaborations** that add value to the outcomes for their students and staff,
- 6) needs to be **efficient commissioners** of the wider range of support and services that can underpin the chances of successful outcomes for all their students.

Clusters are a key part of the organisational infrastructure for the delivery of the outcomes for children and young people. They are essential to improved attainment, achievement and mutual support within the accountability model. They are an essential part of the solution to the challenge of providing equality of access for every child. Whether it is the joint delivery of the curriculum, sharing of resources including staff, joint procurement of services, joint training and development, joint planning for the delivery of extended services or the joint provision for all children in a given area clusters are a key part of the delivery model.

The level of engagement of some schools in cluster leadership and activity has traditionally varied considerably. However, if we are to involve all Headteachers and their governing bodies in detailed discussion about how policy, guidance etc can be put into practice then we need an infrastructure of clusters akin to that currently in place but with greater levels of commitment and governance.

For many strategic as well as operational kinds of decision we need fixed or geographically locally based clusters but with schools feeling confident to be part of several functional clusters where this may be appropriate. What is essential is that our organisational clusters fully involve primary, secondary and special school provision and have an effective governor structure. They should also include Academies and where possible Children's Centres.

We have stated clearly before that the LA needs both strong Associations, formally through Union activity and through properly constituted Head and Governor Associations AND very active strategic and operational clusters that ensure high levels of involvement by all schools in looking at how policy and strategy operate.

The current Coalition Government may have changed the language and policy environment surrounding schools and emphasises school autonomy but seems also firmly behind the six concepts that underpin our vision for schools. Much of their focus on autonomy is also within an environment of high standards and ensuring that ALL students, and especially those from relatively deprived circumstances, thrive. The focus on academies and school improvement is very much built around ideas of chains of schools and schools linking together to support each other's development as well as driving efficiency into the purchasing of services and support.

C) The current Position – where are we now?

1 What do we mean by a ‘Cluster’?

There is no official definition of a ‘cluster’ of schools, although there is a general understanding of what this means. It is a local, fairly geographically coherent grouping consisting of a secondary school and its feeder primary schools and may or may not have a special school in it. Occasionally more than one High School is in the cluster. This is how the term is used in Norfolk and such clusters form the basis of the way in which most local authorities in England work with schools to deliver a range of services and they provide a fundamental building block of any communications system with schools. While many of the clusters originally formed around admissions or catchment areas for High Schools this is no longer the main reason for the way clusters are configured.

2 Why do we need Cluster Governance?

Governors’ prime duties are towards the school to which they have been appointed or elected and the pupils that attend it. Nevertheless, it is increasingly important that governing bodies have a wider perspective beyond the immediate school community and are able to support the collaborative work of schools in local clusters. For over ten years local clusters of schools in Norfolk have been able to use “cluster funding” (usually in the region of £2,000) to support activities such as transition to secondary schools and joint training.

In recent years changes to legislation have provided a much greater range of alternative governance arrangements to support inter-school collaboration, joint management and executive headship, and hard and soft federations. We already have a significant number of successful partnerships and federations in Norfolk and we have been a national pioneer in this area. Some clusters, for example, are already working on the development of cluster trusts.

A number of funding streams for initiatives such as for Parent Support Advisers and extended school resources have been allocated through school clusters. These and other recent developments led to proposals for the development of appropriate governance structures to ensure that there is proper governor involvement and oversight of the allocation, deployment and monitoring of these resources and value for money for all schools in the cluster.

The benefits of such governance groups would be:

- Proper governance and oversight of all funds allocated to clusters
- Ensuring appropriate governor involvement in appointments
- Regular reporting to individual governing bodies

- Provision of a forum for discussion on potential strategic developments within the cluster such as extended schools, Capital investments, management partnerships, federations and more recently the possible governance of SEN resources.

A couple of years ago we proposed three broad approaches to providing appropriate governance arrangements for cluster funds ranging from a basic reporting system to a highly formalised partnership through a federation or trust. Although these were not prescriptive, and clusters decided to adopt variations to the proposals it was **strongly recommended** that clusters should seriously consider what we called model 2 as the preferred option to provide secure and appropriate arrangements to distribute and account for joint funding streams.

We expected many clusters to go beyond the minimum requirement and build on existing strong cluster links and collaborations to develop what we called “Cluster Governors’ Committees”. These were regular meetings of representative governors from each school in a cluster which have as their core purpose the strategic oversight of cluster funding and the activities it supports. It was felt that this kind of forum would also be able to consider a range of other issues including cluster curriculum developments, joint staffing arrangements and future school organisation arrangements in the area. Governors would be able to take a strategic view of the development of school and wider Children’s Services provision. Draft terms of reference and constitutional arrangements for The Model, adopted by most clusters, were:

Model Terms of Reference

1. To monitor the spending of funds delegated by the Local Authority or other sources to the cluster of schools, via the designated recipient school
2. To ensure that all schools in the cluster receive regular reports on the use of funds allocated to the cluster
3. To receive reports from any schools or individuals to whom a responsibility or decision has been delegated, and to consider any action required to be taken by the committee.
4. To monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of any actions taken by the schools in the cluster in relation to spending delegated funding
5. To ensure that all pupils in the cluster of schools benefit from cluster activities, and their families where appropriate.
6. To agree any procedures where the committee has discretion.
7. To review the mechanism of cluster partnership governance annually

Model Constitutional Arrangements

1. The committee shall meet at least once per term, or more frequently by agreement of the voting members.
2. The committee shall elect, by majority vote, a Chair and Vice-Chair from amongst the voting governor members, through self-nomination for the position unless otherwise agreed by the voting committee members.

3. Committee meetings shall be formally clerked, preferably by an independent clerk, i.e. not a clerk from any of the cluster schools.
4. Sub-committees or working groups to be established where appropriate to facilitate the work of the committee
5. Every governing body in the cluster is entitled to have voting membership of the committee.
6. Voting members of the committee shall be named full members of the cluster governing bodies.
7. Each governing body shall name a substitute to attend meetings when the voting member is unable to attend.
8. The Headteacher of the school to which the cluster funding is delegated shall be a member of the committee
9. The Headteacher of every other school in the cluster shall be a member of the committee unless s/he chooses not to be.
10. Each Headteacher shall name a substitute to attend meetings in his or her absence.
11. The quorum for meetings shall be 50% of the voting governor members.
12. Each cluster school shall have one vote.
13. Decisions shall be made by majority vote.
14. Representative governors from Academies, Trust Schools or Interim Executive Boards shall be bound by general governance arrangements for Maintained, VC, VA or Foundation Schools.
15. Committee members will provide a report for their own school governing body (**OR**, Minutes of meetings will be distributed to individual governing bodies by individual voting members)

3 Hard Federations and Trusts covering some or all the schools in the cluster.

At the most formalised end of the spectrum it would be possible in due course, where schools felt it would be appropriate, to establish whole-cluster federations under one governing body, or a Trust in which all cluster schools were represented on the Trust Board. A single federated governing body would in any case be able to oversee the cluster funding arrangements, and a Trust Board or sub-group would also be able to perform the same function. Two clusters so far have adopted a model close to this approach.

DISCUSSION POINT

Do the cluster governance models still provide a strong enough guide as to how clusters should be governed currently and in the future?

Do we still want to promote formal arrangements such as Federation / Trust in the new cluster arrangements.? What might these look like?

4 What do effective clusters try to achieve?

The following list is indicative of some of the very good practice found in clusters across the county. Not every cluster tries to do all of these but most of the themes are explored at times.

- A collaborative focus on raising standards
- A local Every Child Matters agenda, i.e. local solutions to local issues
- The development of a wider entitlement of experiences for all our pupils
- The opportunity to develop more cross-phase projects / programmes to work innovatively with any specialist provision (SEN) or Academy Trust or Children's Centre in the locality / cluster
- The opportunity to create more efficient and effective support services
- The opportunity to develop a new inclusive curriculum with effective transition from pre-school to post 16
- The ability to attract staff to more innovative approaches
- Provide school improvement support
- Bid to provide new schools?

Chairs of effective clusters have identified a range of ways that clusters could enhance the ability of individual schools to maintain or improve standards of achievement. The following are illustrative of the variety of approaches, they are not an agenda for clusters but clusters may find them useful to create a health check on their own activity.

a) Raise standards in teaching and learning by:-

- More cross-phase teaching
- More specialist teaching
- Focus on specialist Early Years teachers in the Foundation Stage
- Master classes in PE and Art/Design
- More frequent use of specialist facilities (design studios, labs, pool, sports hall)
- Identification of G & T from an early age
- Shared G&T programmes
- 6th form mentors
- Mentor NQTs and other new teachers
- ??

b) Raise standards by providing / commissioning more integrated support for children and families by:-

- Full service extended services
- Safer schools partnership
- Behaviour and attendance partnership
- SEN support
- Integrate the work and activities of the local Children's Centre(s)
- Extending the PSA support
- CAF co-ordinator for the cluster
- Developing parenting support programmes

Discussion paper on the future of clusters in Norfolk.

- Engaging with family support / intervention programmes
- ??

c) Raise standards through extended or additional school activity such as:-

- Cluster Primary Choir
- Cluster Orchestra / ensembles – ages 10 to 18
- Outdoor Education experiences
- Specialist clubs e.g. gymnastics
- Engagement activities for vulnerable children
- ??

d) Raise standards by expanding the entitlement of students across the cluster in for example:-

- A major cultural event
- An outdoor education experience
- A major sporting event
- An international visit
- ??

e) Raise standards by providing better support and development for leadership and management through:-

- Enhanced governance
- Executive leadership role(s)
- Built in experience across several schools
- Expertise in resource management
- Greater range of middle leadership roles and responsibilities

f) Raise standards by making more efficient use of resources:-

- Grounds Maintenance
- Premises
- School improvement
- ??

g) Raise standards by creating better CPD and staff development opportunities such as:-

- Enriching all schools through the use of in-house expertise
- More collaborative CPD (including cross-phase)
- Links with HE / FE
- Local leadership development programme
- SCITT
- Induction across different schools
- ??

Clusters will, from past experience, be able to add significantly to this list or cull it to a key set of factors that best suit their needs.

DISCUSSION POINT

Do these ideas provide a sufficient guide to clusters to think more creatively about what their clusters could achieve?

D What does a cluster need to run effectively?

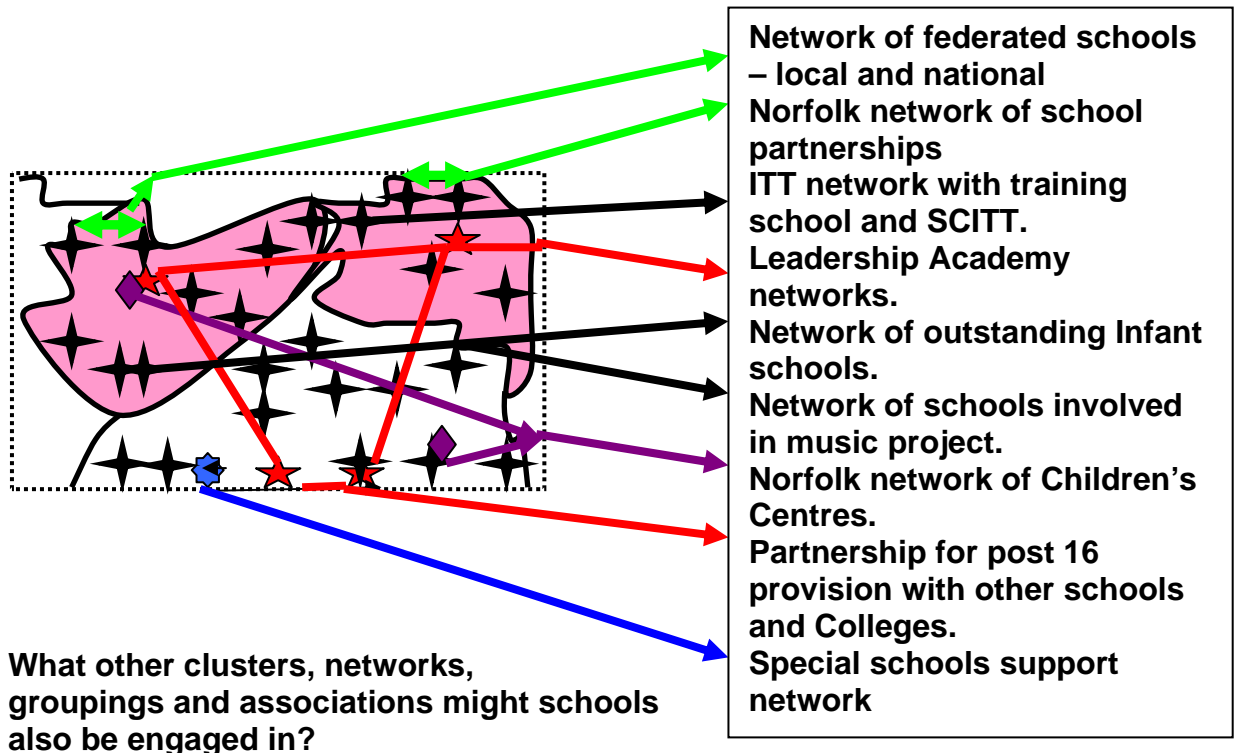
If clusters are to work effectively they need;-

- i) All the schools in the defined area agreeing to work together for the well being of all the children in the area. An effective cluster can cope with one or two schools being less active at particular times of pressure for individual schools but really effective clusters can help mitigate against those pressures.
- ii) All leaders in each school should know and understand what the cluster is trying to achieve, there should where possible be substitutes for attendance at meetings but in the main ALL headteachers need to demonstrate that they value and support the cluster.
- iii) There needs to be strong governance, governing bodies need to understand the cluster and what it is seeking to achieve and there needs to be a clear governance structure with clear decision making and clear links to individual governing bodies.
- iv) Most clusters operate on the basis of all schools being represented at meetings of the cluster, however, with larger clusters it is possible to have smaller executive groups doing a lot of the planning or development work with agreed responsibilities.
- v) As in so many organisational issues the quality of communications is probably the key – each cluster needs a group e mail at the very least and someone who will lead on communications.
- vi) Staff should see involvement in the cluster as good professional development.
- vii) On a rolling programme, headteachers should see leading the cluster as a key system leadership function and gain credit for it with their governing body and in the LA.
- viii) Where possible there should be administrative / clerking support in each cluster.
- ix) The current administrative funding should be enhanced by a contribution from the Early Intervention Grant so that the funding available from both sources should be at least £2 per student.
- x) Clusters can employ staff but only through a host school in much the same way as current Parent Support Advisers are employed. Schools need to ensure that all the risk on any employment for the cluster is on a shared basis but some schools need to be prepared to act as host.
- xi) Clusters need clear finance structures including penalties for non participation.
- xii) For some activity the level of resource may be such that there is a need to link clusters together to support some initiatives – much as the Great Yarmouth structure had some activity operating at the 3 cluster level, some at cluster level and some at partnerships of schools level.
- xiii) Every cluster should have access to known staff from the operations and advisory teams.

- xiv) Every cluster should have a linked senior member of staff from the LA as a point of reference and support.
- xv) Clusters can operate with some schools within it as a federation, we think such federations give greater security to clusters and should be considered actively by all.

DISCUSSION POINT

Do these 15 points provide sufficient guidance as to how clusters could operate effectively?



While the schools are members of their local (administrative or geographical) cluster many are also members of a wide variety of useful groupings and associations for a whole range of reasons, common interest, research group, joint curriculum planning group, phase interest group etc – many of these are also called clusters and our new proposals in no way cut across the ability of any school to determine other groupings it wishes to be part of. It would be helpful if we could keep the term “cluster” to refer solely to the local grouping of schools that has a strategic role in commissioning and governing the use of resources as described in this paper. All other groupings should be called; networks, groups, partnerships etc. The only exceptions to the concept of local geographically coherent clusters are the Catholic Schools working to Notre Dame and the Special or Complex Needs schools where there is a desire to have their special interest links as the dominant administrative cluster as well and that they will make local arrangements for their geographical linkages. Consideration needs to be given to where the Short Stay School links in since the reorganisation of the PRUs.

Fred Corbett – August / September/ October 2011 – consultation version
File – developing a new strategy for CLUSTERS in Norfolk

While much cluster activity is very good in summary current clusters have the following issues to be resolved;-

- Cluster organisation varies from some excellent to some poor.
- Clusters vary greatly in size both in terms of numbers of students and number of schools.
- Some clusters find it difficult to manage the additional responsibilities of chairing the cluster.
- Some clusters find it difficult to manage the additional resource management required.
- Some clusters have found it difficult to develop effective governance arrangements.
- Variability in the effectiveness of some cluster arrangements means that there is insufficient confidence in the cluster arrangements to support further delegation of resources.
- If we are to achieve the fundamental changes in SEN leadership, management and resource allocation we need to strengthen our cluster arrangements.
- If we are to provide a counterbalance to pressures that greater school autonomy might create then a strengthening of clusters could ensure that families of schools are strengthened in their ability to work effectively together.
- If we are to develop a greater ability for schools to support each other then clusters need to be strong.
- If we are to enable schools to become commissioners of services then effective clusters could be an essential part of the necessary infrastructure.

DISCUSSION POINT

Is the problem / challenge understandable?

Are the bullet pointed issues clear? Are there others? We need to check that the proposals give a good chance of these issues being overcome.

E) Possibilities – what are the options for change

It is possible to create a new and more effective pattern of clusters to overcome the issues identified above. However, this pattern of clusters will need to coincide with a re-commitment to cluster working, re-commitment to effective cluster governance in some areas and clarity about the resources that are delegated through clusters and also what resources schools could have to allocate to cluster working.

Principles underpinning the reconfiguration of the geography of Norfolk's school clusters

- Existing boundaries for the seven districts will remain important and close alignment should be attempted.
- No change is anticipated to the three operational divisions for Children's Services, close alignment is desirable.
- Close alignment with new GP consortia would be desirable.
- Alignment with the reach areas of Children's Centres would be desirable.
- Existing boundaries of clusters to be incorporated where possible.
- Existing clusters should be incorporated and new groupings created, where possible, by amalgamating adjacent existing clusters.
- Some urban areas, especially Kings Lynn and perhaps Great Yarmouth and Norwich may need re-organising on new boundaries.
- There is no problem about having more than one high school in a cluster.
- Clusters should not have less than a minimum of about 2,500 students of school age except in exceptional circumstances.
- Clusters should not have more than 5,000 students in them.
- Therefore there should be between 22 and 32+ clusters but the drive should be to reduce the number where possible.
- Clusters should have a suitable amount of administrative resource allocated to support the chair of the cluster and effective governance.
- Clusters reorganisation must enable clusters to work at several different levels of linkage – with other groupings etc
- Cluster re-organisation must enable the new SEN model to operate effectively – see discussion below

DISCUSSION POINT

Are these the right principles?

The importance of the Cluster Framework for proposed SEN arrangements

What is the SEN cluster framework?

The SEN cluster framework is a proposed structure for action linked to the strategy for devolved SEN funding to clusters. It is a working model to support the professional development of clusters regarding the decision making and operational practice regarding the distribution of the devolved SEN funding.

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Why is this important?

Norfolk has made the decision to delegate all pupil specific SEN funding to schools and settings. During initial consultations with Head teachers, a view emerged regarding the potential to 'pool' a percentage of this budget within clusters. A decision on the nature of the distribution of funds will be made as part of the fair funding consultation. As part of the process of securing full delegation of SEN funding to clusters by April 2013, it was agreed that SEN funds would be devolved to clusters by June 2012. The process of devolving budgets will include an operational framework, promoting consistency, equity and transparency, as well as facilitating a context for both cluster autonomy and accountability.

What will this look like?

The framework itself will be presented as a 'guide book' with tools for implementation. The tools will include individual school/setting preparation tasks, schedule for meetings and suggested monitoring systems. Cluster 'personalisation' of tools will be encouraged and training events hosted.

To establish this the LA will establish:

- *the model for distribution of SEN funds through the fair funding consultation.*
- *Clarity of budget announcements for each cluster.*
- *The financial infrastructure regarding access and storage of funds.*
- *Clear supporting documentation to aid the cluster SEN co-ordinators in their work.*

Under new arrangements clusters will need to:

- *Identify SEN 'needs' within the cluster including pupil specific allocations and an agreement of the 'pooled' remainder.*
- *Identify a 'SEN Provision Co-ordinator' for each cluster. This could be a nominated Head or senior manager from a school or setting, or an appointed consultant.*

Cluster Provision Co-ordinators would:

- *Distribute the SEN audit tool to each school or setting for completion.*
- *Summarise SEN profile for cluster, identify development themes, intervention priorities and reviews available expertise and SEN services.*
- *Organise meeting dates with all Heads in attendance, construct and circulate the agenda and chair initial meeting in Summer term 2012 completing the appropriate implementation phase using supported documents.*

Therefore, we need clusters that can operate at a number of different levels – for example –

Schools need to feel free to make local and or more distant linkages for mutual benefit and these can be either informal at the level of Headteacher agreement on a professional basis but depending on the level of formality emerging will require careful governance especially at formal partnership or federation levels.

Groups of schools, including existing catchment area clusters can continue to operate on the basis of mutual benefit and again can be informal or formal. For example if the current Litcham Cluster is amalgamated in one of the forms set out in this discussion the Litcham schools could continue to develop their

strong all age curriculum and support models but in the formal sense belong to the new style cluster dealing with a range of operational and commissioning issues.

The new larger geographically based local clusters will be the County wide agreed Cluster format. It will be through these that resources will flow and also LA communications, and where possible NCC staff will be allocated to working with defined clusters. It is at this level that strong governance will be needed at least at the level of Section (C) part 4 above. Depending on the size of the cluster in terms of numbers of schools the Cluster will need to agree levels of representation and whether for some activity smaller local groupings would be beneficial – these might or might not be on the basis of previous catchment clusters, the key is that at County level there will only be one representative per cluster, where resources including administrative support are allocated to clusters it will only be to the new cluster that these will be allocated and not to sub groups that may be agreed locally to facilitate some of the collaborative benefits discussed in the previous section.

For some major pieces of work clusters may decide to aggregate up to bigger units and this might be the case in the way SEN funding and other resources are managed.

DISCUSSION POINT

Have we got sufficient clarity about what is needed for the new clusters to be able to deliver the proposed new arrangements for devolving and then delegating SEN resources?

OPTIONS

1. Leave existing clusters as they are. This would not deal with the challenges and issues identified.
2. Completely redraw new clusters and align with the emerging 5 or 6 GP consortia. This would perhaps have the benefit of aligning commissioning with emerging NHS / GP structures but the lack of a sense of “belonging” for most schools would lead to no more than a new administrative structure divorced from the ability of all schools to contribute and shape collaborations.
3. Re-create localities by dividing up the newly defined Children’s Services 3 Divisions to create 9 or 10 new clusters of about 10,000 or 12,000 students. This would seem to have similar issues to option 2 above but could be created by putting together clusters developed under 4 below for specific purposes such as SEN decision making if required.
4. Use existing clusters and amalgamate adjacent clusters to create “new” clusters of – where possible – minimum student numbers (including High School and / or Academy) of 2,500 and maximum of 5,000 – thereby creating a new pattern of clusters of around 22 to 32 with average cluster size being around 4,000. The local physical geography must also be taken into account, particularly based on travel times / distance. This option could be organised on several different geographical arrangements. This is the preferred option we should consult on and several versions of it are developed below using the same principles but making different assumptions about which clusters might link together.

DISCUSSION POINT

Are these the only options and is option four the right one to go for?